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## STAGING FAILURE? BERTA LASK'S *THOMAS MÜNZER* (1925) AND THE 400TH ANNIVERSARY OF THE GERMAN PEASANTS' WAR

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### ABSTRACT

This article examines Berta Lask's drama *Thomas Münzer* (1925), which was commissioned by the Kommunistische Partei Deutschlands (KPD) and staged in Eisleben to mark the 400th anniversary of the German Peasants' War (1524–5) and the execution of Thomas Müntzer. Drawing on cultural memory theory and reading the play as a multi-layered *lieu de mémoire*, it argues that Lask attempts to recuperate the revolutionary potential of the failed Peasants' War and harness it to the agenda of the KPD of the 1920s. The article begins by situating Lask's play in a tradition of leftist writing about the Peasants' War dating back to the mid-nineteenth century. It then considers the ways in which Lask uses historical analogy to create connections between the sixteenth-century uprising and events in post-World War I German political history. Finally, the article explores the techniques used by Lask to create a sense of revolutionary community among her actors and audience.

Dieser Artikel untersucht Berta Lasks Massendrama *Thomas Münzer* (1925), das von der Kommunistischen Partei Deutschlands (KPD) in Auftrag gegeben und in Eisleben anlässlich des 400. Jahrestages des deutschen Bauernkrieges (1524–5) und der Hinrichtung von Thomas Müntzer aufgeführt wurde. Bezugnehmend auf Theorien des kulturellen Gedächtnisses, wobei das Massendrama als ein vielschichtiger Erinnerungsort (*lieu de mémoire*) gedeutet wird, versucht der Artikel, Lasks Bestrebungen aufzuweisen, das revolutionäre Potential des gescheiterten Bauernkrieges wiederzubeleben und es mit der politischen Agenda der KPD zu verknüpfen. Nach einer Verortung von Lasks Drama im Kontext der seit Mitte des 19. Jahrhunderts erschienenen linken Historiographie, untersucht der Artikel, wie Lask historische Analogien benutzt, um Verbindungen zwischen dem Bauernkrieg und politischen Ereignissen der frühen Weimarer Republik zu ziehen. Zum Schluss werden die dramatischen Techniken analysiert, die Lask verwendet, um ein revolutionäres Gemeinschaftsgefühl unter Schauspielern und Zuschauern zu kreieren.

On 31 May 1925, the Kommunistische Partei Deutschlands (KPD) staged a large-scale festival in the Saxon town of Eisleben to commemorate the 400th anniversary of the German Peasants' War.<sup>1</sup> Around 15,000 people attended the event, which included speeches by leading communist

<sup>1</sup> For an overview of the anniversary commemoration, see Horst Bartel, 'Der deutsche Bauernkrieg in der Tradition der revolutionären Arbeiterbewegung', *Zeitschrift für Geschichtswissenschaft*, 23 (1975), 133–51. See also Jay Rosellini, *Thomas Müntzer im deutschen Drama: Verteufelung, Apotheose und Kritik*, Bern 1978, pp. 127–31.

figures,<sup>2</sup> performances by massed choirs and drama groups, and the distribution of revolutionary pamphlets. At the centre of the festivities was the premiere of the newly commissioned mass drama *Thomas Münzer* [sic]: *Dramatisches Gemälde des deutschen Bauernkrieges von 1525* by Berta Lask (1878–1967), which was performed in the open air by 150 amateur actors under the direction of Ilse Berend-Groa (1885–1972) from the Proletkult Kassel.<sup>3</sup> In the preface to the published version of the play, which appeared in print later that year, Lask notes that her primary intention was to reveal parallels between the historic events of 1524–5 and the situation of the proletariat in 1920s Germany: ‘Ich will dem klassenbewußten kämpfenden Proletariat der Gegenwart den revolutionären Klassenkampf seiner Vorfahren zeigen’.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, by highlighting the specific reasons why the peasants were defeated in 1525, she hoped to create a play that would contribute to the revolutionary struggles of the present: ‘So soll dieses Stück der Klärung und Festigung im Gegenwartskampf dienen’ (L, p. 311).

Lask’s play, and the commemorative activities surrounding it, raise several questions about the significance of the memory of the failed peasants’ revolt in the collective imaginary of the KPD in this period: why did the events of 1524–5 play such a major role in the cultural life of the party? What kind of vision of the Peasants’ War did the commemorative activities construct? How did they engage with the unrealised revolutionary potential inherent in this failed historical uprising? And how did the KPD attempt to harness the political and cultural capital of the anniversary to its own agenda? In this article, I shall address these questions by teasing out the various ‘memorial layers’ present in these commemorative activities.<sup>5</sup> In this regard, I borrow a term coined by Ann Rigney to denote the ways in which cultural memories ‘converge and coalesce’ into *lieux de mémoire*.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>2</sup> The transcript of Edwin Hoernle’s speech was subsequently published in the party journal *Die Internationale*. See Edwin Hoernle, ‘Der große Bauernkrieg vor 400 Jahren und das revolutionäre Proletariat von heute’, *Die Internationale*, 4 (1925), 182–8.

<sup>3</sup> Lask’s adoption of this form of Münzer’s name follows the example of Engels, on whose work she drew extensively, and of other writers on the left. On the history of the Proletkult Kassel, see Ludwig Hoffmann and Daniel Hoffmann-Ostwald, *Deutsches Arbeitertheater 1918–1933*, 2 vols, Munich 1973, I, pp. 224–5. See also Richard Bodek, *Proletarian Performance in Weimar Berlin: Agitprop, Chorus, and Brecht*, Columbia, SC 1997.

<sup>4</sup> There are very few extant copies of the first edition of Lask’s play, so references here are to the reprinted version of the text in Heinz Zander (ed.), *1525. Dramen zum deutschen Bauernkrieg*, Berlin 1975, pp. 309–58 (here p. 311). Further references to this edition appear in the text as (L, p. no.).

<sup>5</sup> Ann Rigney, ‘Plenitude, Scarcity and the Circulation of Cultural Memory’, *Journal of European Studies*, 35 (2005), 11–28 (19). See also Laura Basu, ‘Towards a Memory Dispositif: Truth, Myth, and the Ned Kelly *lieu de mémoire*, 1890–1930’, in *Mediation, Remediation, and the Dynamics of Cultural Memory*, ed. Astrid Erll and Ann Rigney, Berlin 2009, pp. 139–56 (pp. 140–2).

<sup>6</sup> Rigney, ‘Plenitude’ (note 5), 19.

Building on Pierre Nora's influential concept,<sup>7</sup> Rigney argues that sites of memory function as 'cultural frameworks' that allow multiple memories to be condensed and concentrated in a single place, object, or event.<sup>8</sup> These sites are not static, but rather are constantly reinvested with new meanings which are superimposed onto one another to form 'memorial layers'.<sup>9</sup> As 'symbolic points of reference', they serve as 'communal orientation points in collective self-definitions and in the contestation of identities'.<sup>10</sup> In particular, they allow emergent groups to 'confirm their identity as a group' by reinforcing their sense of a common past and allowing them to 'bring new "working memories" into circulation'.<sup>11</sup>

In this article, I present original research on Lask that intervenes in scholarly debates about the importance of cultural memory in the formation of politicised collective identities. Reading Lask's play and the anniversary festivities as a complex, multi-layered site of memory, I wish to argue that they served to foster a sense of group identity and create a narrative of political legitimacy for the relatively newly founded KPD. Such acts of identity formation were particularly important for the party at a time when it was facing internal tensions due to the increasing authority exerted over it by the Communist Party of the Soviet Union.<sup>12</sup> In what follows, I aim to show how Lask's play reconstructs the history of the Peasants' War in an attempt to recuperate its revolutionary potential and harness it to the agenda of the KPD. My argument will proceed in three stages: first, I shall set out the ways in which Lask's play taps into a tradition of leftist historiography about the Peasants' War dating back to the early nineteenth century, notably through its engagement with Friedrich Engels' study on the topic. In the second part of the article, I shall explore the ways in which Lask uses historical analogy to create a sense of revolutionary heritage for the proletariat of the 1920s. Finally, I will consider the techniques used by Lask in her play to develop a sense of community among her actors and audience, reading this as an example of an attempt to perform a choric 'we' that represents the envisioned collectivity of the revolutionary proletariat.

Despite a recent upsurge in critical interest in questions of performance and revolutionary politics in the Weimar Republic,<sup>13</sup> there has, to date,

<sup>7</sup> See Pierre Nora, *Les lieux de mémoire*, 7 vols, Paris 1984–92. For Nora, *lieux de mémoire* are not necessarily real places; they can also include works of art, rituals, memorial days, texts, and symbolic actions.

<sup>8</sup> Rigney, 'Plenitude' (note 5), 18.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 19.

<sup>10</sup> Ann Rigney, *The Afterlives of Walter Scott. Memory on the Move*, Oxford 2012, p. 18.

<sup>11</sup> Rigney, 'Plenitude' (note 5), 23.

<sup>12</sup> See Eric Weitz, *Creating German Communism, 1890–1990. From Popular Protests to Socialist State*, Princeton, NJ 1997, pp. 233–6. For an overview of the tensions within the KPD in the 1920s, see Ralf Hoffrogge and Norman LaPorte (eds), *Weimar Communism as Mass Movement, 1918–1933*, Chadwell Heath 2017.

<sup>13</sup> See, for example, Robert Heynen, *Degeneration and Revolution: Radical Cultural Politics and the Body in Weimar Germany*, Leiden 2015; Henning Grunwald, *Courtroom to Revolutionary Stage: Performance*

been very little scholarship on Lask's dramatic works.<sup>14</sup> This is surprising, given the fact that she was well regarded in the Berlin theatre scene during the 1920s, collaborated with Erwin Piscator (1893–1966) on her play *Leuna 1921* (1926), and became a founding member of the Bund proletarisch-revolutionärer Schriftsteller in 1928, alongside figures such as Johannes Becher (1891–1958), Egon Erwin Kisch (1885–1948), and Anna Seghers (1900–83). The fact that Lask has been largely overlooked might be due, in part, to the fact that her larger works were heavily censored and increasingly banned from performance from the mid-1920s due to their revolutionary content, and there are now very few extant print editions.<sup>15</sup> In this article, I build on research by Klaus Kändler, who reads Lask's work through the lens of Marxist literary theory, highlighting her role in developing the mass drama as a means of conveying a 'Marxistisch-leninistische Geschichtsauffassung'.<sup>16</sup> Kändler's study usefully highlights the ways in which the aesthetic form of Lask's drama is closely bound up with her political vision, particularly regarding her focus on the role of the masses as the main agent of social history: 'das Einzelschicksal wird im Verhältnis zum Massenschicksal und zum revolutionären Weg der Massen für belanglos erklärt'.<sup>17</sup> However, he does not explore how this vision of

*and Ideology in Weimar Political Trials*, Oxford 2012; Kathleen Canning, Kerstin Barndt, and Kristin McGuire, *Weimar Publics/Weimar Subjects: Rethinking the Political Culture of Germany in the 1920s*, New York 2010; Timothy Scott Brown, *Weimar Radicals: Nazis and Communists between Authenticity and Performance*, New York 2008; and Yvonne Hardt, *Politische Körper: Ausdruckstanz, Choreographien des Protests und die Arbeiterbewegung in der Weimarer Republik*, Münster 2004.

<sup>14</sup> The most comprehensive study of Lask's drama to date can be found in Klaus Kändler, *Drama und Klassenkampf: Beziehungen zwischen Epochenproblematik und dramatischem Konflikt in der sozialistischen Dramatik der Weimarer Republik*, Berlin 1970, pp. 128–42. See also Hoffmann and Hoffmann-Ostwald, *Deutsches Arbeitertheater* (note 3), I, pp. 224–39; and Rüdiger Safranski and Walter Fähnders, 'Proletarisch-revolutionäre Literatur', in *Literatur der Weimarer Republik 1918–1933*, ed. Bernhard Weyergraf, Munich 1995, pp. 174–231. There is a useful chapter on Lask's play *Leuna 1921* (1926) in Sarah Colvin, *Women and German Drama: Playwrights and their Texts, 1860–1945*, Rochester, NY 2003, pp. 103–26. On Lask's play *Die Befreiung* (1925), see the preface to Agnès Cardinal's translation in *War Plays by Women: An International Anthology*, ed. Claire M. Tylee, London 1999, pp. 81–4. See also Cardinal's chapter 'Shadow Playwrights of Weimar: Berta Lask, Ilse Langner, Marieluise Fleißer', in *Women in European Theatre*, ed. Elizabeth Woodrrough, Oxford 1995, pp. 65–74 – though unfortunately there are some factual inaccuracies in this essay. On Lask's membership of the Bund proletarisch-revolutionärer Schriftsteller, see Doris Danzer, *Zwischen Vertrauen und Verrat: Deutschsprachige kommunistische Intellektuelle und ihre sozialen Beziehungen (1918–1960)*, Göttingen 2012, pp. 174–5.

<sup>15</sup> On the censorship history of Lask's plays, see Klaus Petersen, *Zensur in der Weimarer Republik*, Stuttgart 1995, pp. 181, 194, and 222. In 1927, Johannes R. Becher noted that 'Genossin Berta Lask kann heute schon kein einziges Drama mehr schreiben, das nicht bereits vor der Aufführung verboten wäre: "Thomas Münzer", ein Drama aus der Zeit des mitteldeutschen Aufstandes; "Giftgasnebel über Sowjetrußland", ein Drama, das gegen den Interventionskrieg gerichtet ist – das sind ihre bedeutendsten Schöpfungen, die – das versteht sich von selbst – verboten und abgesetzt wurden'; see Becher, 'Über die proletarisch-revolutionäre Literatur in Deutschland', *Die Linkskurve*, 1 (1927). The essay is reprinted in *Zur Tradition der sozialistischen Literatur in Deutschland*, ed. Deutsche Akademie der Künste zu Berlin, 2nd edn, Berlin 1967, pp. 28–33 (p. 30).

<sup>16</sup> Kändler, *Drama und Klassenkampf* (note 14), p. 135.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 134.

mass solidarity is created, nor how Lask's work both depicts and enacts this vision. In this article, I shall explore these issues and, in doing so, seek to shed light on the formation of powerful emotional communities through leftist cultural activities in the context of the Weimar Republic.

#### PATTERNS OF REPRESENTATION

In her recent study on the dynamics of cultural memory, Astrid Erll suggests that 'what is known about a [historical] event' results not so much from 'what one might cautiously call the "actual event"', but rather from 'a canon of existent medial constructions', in other words, from 'the narratives, images and myths circulating in a memory culture'.<sup>18</sup> For Erll, the convergence of medial representations of an event that leads to the formation of a *lieu de mémoire* arises from two key processes, which, drawing on concepts from media theory, she terms 'premediation' and 'remediation'. Whereas 'premediation' refers to 'the existent media which circulate in a given society' and which 'provide schemata for new experience and representation', 'remediation' denotes the ways in which 'events [...] are usually represented again and again, over decades and centuries, in different media'.<sup>19</sup> These terms provide a vocabulary for thinking through the various 'memorial layers' associated with a given site of memory, enabling light to be shed on the ways in which certain images and narratives form particular 'patterns of representation' that influence our perception of a given historical event.<sup>20</sup> They draw our attention to the way in which the cultural memory of past events influences our expectations and our capacity to make new meanings, and reveal the extent to which any given site of memory is connected to the circulation of pre-existing representations and medial forms.

Viewed in this light, the commemorative activities for the 400th anniversary of the Peasants' War can be linked to 'premediated' memories of the event that had been circulating through leftist literature, art and historiography since the mid-nineteenth century.<sup>21</sup> One of the most

<sup>18</sup> Astrid Erll, 'Literature, Film, and the Mediality of Cultural Memory', in *Cultural Memory Studies: An International and Interdisciplinary Handbook*, ed. Astrid Erll and Ansgar Nünning, Berlin 2008, pp. 389–98 (p. 392).

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>20</sup> Astrid Erll and Ann Rigney, 'Introduction: Cultural Memory and its Dynamics', in *Mediation, Remediation, and the Dynamics of Cultural Memory*, ed. Erll and Rigney (note 5), pp. 1–14 (p. 8).

<sup>21</sup> Historiographical works in this tradition include Wilhelm Zimmermann, *Der große deutsche Bauernkrieg* (1841–3); August Bebel, *Der deutsche Bauernkrieg* (1876); Karl Kautsky, *Die Bergarbeiter und der Bauernkrieg* (1889), and *Vorläufer des neueren Sozialismus* (1895); and Ernst Bloch, *Thomas Münzer als Theologe der Revolution* (1921). Literary works include novels by Theodor Mundt (*Thomas Münzer*, 1841) and Robert Schweichel (*Florian Geyers Heldentod*, 1876, and *Um die Freiheit*, 1898–9); as well as plays by Hermann Rollett (*Thomas Münzer*, 1851) and Konrad Wolf (*Der arme Konrad*, 1924). Käthe Kollwitz's graphic cycle *Der Bauernkrieg* (1903–8) is perhaps one of the most well-known artworks in this tradition.

influential works was Friedrich Engels' *Der deutsche Bauernkrieg* (1850), which puts forward a historical-materialist reading of the Peasants' War, drawing on the methodology used by Karl Marx in his analysis of the French Revolution.<sup>22</sup> Basing his source material on an earlier study by the Left Hegelian historian Wilhelm Zimmermann (1807–78), Engels sets out to situate the events of 1524–5 within a specifically German revolutionary tradition, as he explains in his first chapter:

Auch das deutsche Volk hat seine revolutionäre Tradition. Es gab eine Zeit, wo Deutschland Charaktere hervorbrachte, die sich den besten Leuten der Revolutionen anderer Länder an die Seite stellen können, wo das deutsche Volk eine Ausdauer und Energie entwickelte, die bei einer zentralisierteren Nation die großartigsten Resultate erzeugt hätte [...].<sup>23</sup>

Writing in the immediate aftermath of the unsuccessful 1848 revolutions, Engels uses historical analogy in an attempt, as Bob Scribner notes, to 'reveal the nature of the historical process and so aid understanding of the present'.<sup>24</sup> Engels reads the Peasants' War as an early attempt at a bourgeois revolution which arose due to the changing economic and social conditions in the fourteenth, fifteenth, and early sixteenth centuries. While the development of new technologies, together with the expansion of mining and cloth production, had led to a rise in industrial production and commerce, Germany still lagged behind its European neighbours because it had no centralised political structures (E, pp. 331–2). This led to the fragmentation ('Zersplitterung') of interests and the gradual disintegration of the feudal empire, with traditional bonds of unity being weakened (E, p. 332). At the same time, the period saw the development of a new order of social classes – made up of 'Fürsten, Adel, Prälaten, Patrizier, Bürger, Plebejer und Bauern' – each with a range of different, often competing needs and demands (E, p. 339). The spread of political–theological ideas in the context of the Reformation enabled these social classes to crystallise into three groups: first 'das katholische oder reaktionäre', made up of ecclesiastical princes and some of the lay princes, the richer nobility, the prelates, and the city patricians, who were largely in favour of maintaining the existing imperial power; second 'das lutherische bürgerlich reformierende', which attracted many of the anti-feudal elements of society, such as the lower nobility, the burgher classes, and the remainder of the lay princes; and third 'das revolutionäre', consisting of peasants and plebeians (E, p. 342).

<sup>22</sup> On Engels' study and its relation to other works by Zimmermann, Bebel, and Kautsky, see Bob Scribner, 'Revolutionary Heritage: The German Peasants' War of 1525', in *People's History and Socialist Theory*, ed. Raphael Samuel, Abingdon 1981, pp. 242–54.

<sup>23</sup> Friedrich Engels, 'Der deutsche Bauernkrieg' (1875 edn), in Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Werke*, 39 vols, Berlin 1955–66, VII, pp. 327–413 (p. 329). Further references appear in the text as (E, p. no.)

<sup>24</sup> Scribner, 'Revolutionary Heritage' (note 22), p. 249.



It is against this backdrop that Engels contrasts the different leadership styles of Martin Luther and Thomas Müntzer. Luther, he argues, is initially struck by revolutionary ardour ('revolutionäre Feuereifer', E, p. 348) in fighting the Catholic orthodoxy – Engels draws a comparison here with the liberal bourgeoisie in 1847, who were 'noch [...] revolutionär, nannten sich Sozialisten und Kommunisten und schwärmten für die Emanzipation der Arbeiterklasse' (E, p. 347). As soon as the revolutionary movement gained traction, however, Luther turned against it, siding with the princely forces against the peasants and plebeians. Engels writes:

Luther hatte der plebejischen Bewegung ein mächtiges Werkzeug in die Hand gegeben durch die Übersetzung der Bibel. [...] Die Bauern hatten dies Werkzeug gegen Fürsten, Adel, Pfaffen, nach allen Seiten hin benutzt. Jetzt kehrte Luther es gegen sie [...]. Nicht nur der Bauernaufstand, auch die ganze Auflehnung Luthers selbst gegen die geistliche und weltliche Autorität war hierin verleugnet; nicht nur die populäre Bewegung, auch die bürgerliche war damit an die Fürsten verraten. (E, pp. 350–1)

Luther is thus portrayed by Engels as a traitor to the revolutionary cause: not only does he betray the peasants' rebellion, he also undermines the cause of the anti-feudal middle classes whose demands he initially supported. Once again, Engels draws parallels with the 1848 revolution, pointing to similarities between the language used by Luther to criticise the rebellion and that used by the socialist and philanthropic bourgeoisie towards the proletariat, and evoking examples of bourgeois figures who recently repudiated their own past (E, p. 351).

Whereas Engels criticises Luther's cowardice, self-interest, and hypocrisy in his dealings with the revolutionary groups, Müntzer is evoked as an inspirational revolutionary leader, whose theology and political doctrine reached far beyond his time: 'seine politische Doktrin [...] griff ebensoweit über die unmittelbar vorliegenden gesellschaftlichen und politischen Verhältnisse hinaus wie seine Theologie über die geltenden Vorstellungen seiner Zeit' (E, p. 353). In Engels' analysis, Müntzer becomes the prototype of a communist agitator with skills of which the 1848 revolutionary leaders should be envious: 'sein politisches Programm [streichte] an den Kommunismus, und mehr als eine moderne kommunistische Sekte hatte noch am Vorabend der Februarrevolution über kein reichhaltigeres theoretisches Arsenal zu verfügen als die "Münzerschen" des sechzehnten Jahrhunderts' (E, p. 353). In particular, Engels describes Müntzer's programme in political terms that echo the language of the Communist Manifesto. Thus, his chiliastic theology, which calls for the establishment of God's kingdom on earth, is depicted as a vision of a classless society with no private property: 'Unter dem Reich Gottes verstand Münzer aber nichts anderes als einen Gesellschaftszustand, in dem keine Klassenunterschiede, kein Privateigentum und keine den Gesellschaftsmitgliedern gegenüber



selbständige, fremde Staatsgewalt mehr bestehen' (E, p. 354). Engels continues with a description of the means advocated by Müntzer to implement this revolutionary vision:

Sämtliche bestehende Gewalten, sofern sie nicht sich fügen und der Revolution anschließen wollten, sollten gestürzt, alle Arbeiten und alle Güter gemeinsam und die vollständigste Gleichheit durchgeführt [...] werden. [...] Fürsten und Herren sollten eingeladen werden, sich anzuschließen; wo nicht, sollte der Bund sie bei der ersten Gelegenheit mit den Waffen in der Hand stürzen oder töten. (E, p. 354)

Here, Engels highlights Müntzer's willingness to use violent tactics to ensure the progress of the revolution; this emphasis on his support for political violence clearly chimes with the focus on the forceful liberation of the proletariat that can be found in the Communist Manifesto.

Engels' attempts to draw links to the recent 1848 revolutionary attempt come to a head in the concluding part of his essay, which sets out the reasons for the failure of the 1524–5 uprising. He writes:

Die Zersplitterung Deutschlands, deren Verschärfung und Konsolidierung das Hauptresultat des Bauernkriegs war, war auch zu gleicher Zeit die Ursache seines Mißlingens. [...] Jeder Stand [...] [machte] seine Bewegung auf eigene Faust [...], dadurch nicht nur mit allen konservativen, sondern auch mit allen übrigen opponierenden Ständen in Kollision geriet und schließlich unterliegen mußte. (E, p. 411)

For Engels, the defeat of the revolutionary forces can be attributed to the proliferation of conflicting interests among their constitutive social groups, which meant that they failed to unite behind a single set of demands and that the various rebellions were unable to transcend specific local conditions. Moreover, this situation was exacerbated by the lack of political centralisation in Germany, which resulted in fragmentation of the various protests. In other words, the very conditions which had enabled the uprising to occur also led to its inevitable failure. Crucially, Engels sees similar conditions operating in the 1848 revolution: 'Auch hier bietet sich die Analogie mit der Bewegung von 1848–50 wieder von selbst dar. Auch 1848 kollidierten die Interessen der oppositionellen Klassen untereinander, handelte jede für sich' (E, p. 412). He goes on to dismiss the federal structures of Germany that bring about this fragmentation; as Raina Zimmering notes, they not only hamper the country's national development in comparison with its European neighbours, but also its social and political progress.<sup>25</sup>

Despite his repeated emphasis on the similarities between the two attempted uprisings, Engels concludes his essay on the Peasants' War with

<sup>25</sup> Raina Zimmering, *Mythen in der Politik der DDR: Ein Beitrag zur Erforschung politischer Mythen*, Opladen 2000, pp. 180–1.

a discussion of their differences. While this might appear to serve as a caution against using the Peasants' War as a direct model for understanding contemporary events, however, he actually situates both events in a master narrative of revolutionary progress. Thus, for example, he points out that the revolution of 1525 was a local affair, confined to the German territories (E, p. 413). By contrast, the 1848 revolution was 'ein einzelnes Stück eines großen europäischen Ereignisses' (E, p. 413). Far from being confined to one region or country, it was part of a movement, 'an der jetzt die ganze Welt teilnimmt' (E, p. 413). For this reason, Engels argues, it was impossible for the 1848 revolution to end in precisely the same way as the Peasants' War. Viewed in this light, the sixteenth-century uprising functions as the forerunner to the 1848 revolutionary attempt, which is, in turn, part of an ongoing revolutionary struggle on a global scale. Rather than dwelling on the failure of the earlier revolutions, then, he portrays the global revolutionary movement as growing in strength and impact. His work thus attempts to 'raise morale' and 'inspire future action' in the emancipation of the oppressed classes.<sup>26</sup>

#### CONSTRUCTING REVOLUTIONARY HERITAGE

Lask, who regularly wrote for *Die Rote Fahne* and other communist journals, was familiar with Engels' work and the tradition of leftist thought that discusses the Peasants' War. Indeed, Kändler notes that, in the run-up to the performance of *Thomas Münzer*, Lask met regularly with the cast and director to read and discuss Engels' study.<sup>27</sup> This text had, in fact, been reprinted five times between 1850 and 1920, and a further edition appeared in the run-up to the 1925 anniversary commemoration, sponsored by the KPD and edited by Hermann Duncker (1874–1960).<sup>28</sup> This publication coincided with a renewed interest in the Bauernkrieg that had arisen from 1920, particularly among the KPD. This interest is exemplified by the publication of new political and historical studies such as Clara Zetkin's *Revolutionäre Kämpfe und revolutionäre Kämpfer 1919* (1920) and Max Beer's *Allgemeine Geschichte des Sozialismus und der sozialen Kämpfe* (1924), as well as the publication of a series of pamphlets about the Peasants' War by the party press, Neues Dorf.<sup>29</sup> Many of these texts take up Engels' use of historical analogy, tracing connections between the sixteenth-century uprising and more recent events such as the October Revolution of 1917 and the 1918 November Revolution. These re-workings can be understood as examples of 'remediation', as existing narratives

<sup>26</sup> Scribner, 'Revolutionary Heritage' (note 22), p. 250.

<sup>27</sup> Kändler, *Drama und Klassenkampf* (note 14), pp. 134–6.

<sup>28</sup> Friedrich Engels, *Der deutsche Bauernkrieg*, ed. Hermann Duncker, Berlin 1925.

<sup>29</sup> Daniel Greiner, *Der große Bauernkrieg und Thomas Münzer*, Berlin 1925; Elly Janisch, *Der Freiheitskampf der Bauern. Zum 400-jährigen Gedächtnis des großen Bauernkrieges*, Berlin 1925.

surrounding the Peasants' War are altered and repurposed in the light of new experiences. Through this process, earlier texts, such as that by Engels, come to function as what Rigney terms 'cultural frameworks' that influence how new events are interpreted, while at the same time being overlaid with new layers of meaning.<sup>30</sup>

Lask's *Thomas Münzer* can be read in this context both as a direct response to Engels' text and as an attempt to reinterpret the Peasants' War in the light of the historical events of post-World War I Germany. The play consists of a Prologue and five main Acts, along with two 'Zwischenspiele', in which actors in the role of the director and two spectators interrupt and comment on the action taking place on stage. From the outset, Lask establishes clear parallels between the revolutionary events of 1524–5 and the situation of the proletariat in 1925. The Prologue opens with Thomas Müntzer waking up in 1920s Germany and hearing groups of workers singing the 'Warszawianka' (L, p. 315), a 'Kampflied' that calls on its listeners to rise up and join the revolutionary struggle. Initially, he mistakes these workers for 'his' peasants and wonders whether the chiliastic vision that he prophesied is finally coming into existence: 'Sind meine toten Bauern aufgestanden? Meine Bauern, meine Kampfgenossen, die man erstochen, erschlagen, gespießt, geköpft, gerädert hat [...]? Führt ihr das Tausendjährige Reich herauf?' (L, pp. 315–16). Müntzer's focus on the suffering of the sixteenth-century peasants, emphasised by Lask's technique of accumulating past-participle verb forms, is echoed later in the scene, when he discovers the identity of the workers whose singing he can hear:

MÜNZER Wer seid ihr?

ERSTE GRUPPE Wir sind streikende Bergarbeiter.

MÜNZER Die Bergleute waren immer meine Gesellen.

ZWEITE GRUPPE Wir sind streikende Eisenbahner.

DRITTE GRUPPE Wir sind streikende Metallarbeiter.

[...]

ALLE Wir sind die Elends-Dawes-Garde, wir, das schaffende Volk.

MÜNZER Vertausendfacht das Elend meiner Zeit. (L, p. 316)

The workers of the sixteenth century are connected to those of the 1920s through their experience of suffering – a suffering which seems, to Müntzer, to have increased with the development of industrial modernity. The depiction of the 1920s workers as the 'Elends-Dawes-Garde' situates the text in the context of the Ruhr Crisis of 1923–4 and the subsequent implementation of the Dawes Plan in 1924, which sought to end French and Belgian occupation of the Ruhr and provide a staggered payment plan for Germany's war reparations. The KPD officially opposed the Dawes

<sup>30</sup> Rigney, 'Plenitude' (note 5), 18.

Plan, which it saw both as an example of American imperialism that would negatively impact on Germany's relations with the USSR and as a form of economic exploitation, the brunt of which would be borne by the workers.<sup>31</sup>

As the play progresses, we are transported back in time and presented with a series of scenes from the Peasants' War, from the initial insurrections to Luther's interventions, the defeat of the peasant forces, and the execution of Müntzer. Many of the central characters of the sixteenth-century uprising are directly compared with figures from 1920s Germany. Luther, for example, is likened to both Friedrich Ebert (1871–1925) and Gustav Noske (1868–1946), leaders of the Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands (SPD) who were accused by the KPD of betraying the revolutionary cause by forcibly suppressing the left-wing uprisings of 1918–19 through the use of the army and the Freikorps. In Lask's play, this comparison is made explicit in one of the 'Zwischenspiele', where the following conversation takes place:

ZUSCHAUER Wer ist der, der so hin und her schaukelt und das Volk von der Revolution abbringen will? Ist das Ebert oder Noske?

REGISSEUR Das ist Martin Luther, der evangelische Prediger, der vor vierhundert Jahren lebte.

ZUSCHAUER Der macht es so wie Ebert und Noske – wie?

REGISSEUR Ja, der spielte eine ähnliche Rolle wie unsere Sozialdemokraten. (L, p. 329)

Here, the figure of the 'Regisseur' assumes a didactic role, explaining the connection to the typified spectator and thereby clarifying the intended meaning to the audience of the play. Though the comparison between Luther and the SPD leaders is made obvious in this scene, Lask also evokes it more indirectly elsewhere in the play through the language used by various characters to refer to Luther. For example, one of Müntzer's speeches about Luther is interrupted by cries of 'Volksverräter!' from the crowd on stage (L, p. 338), thereby echoing a term repeatedly used in newspapers to refer to Ebert after 1919. Similarly, Luther himself is later interrupted by the one of the spectator figures, who accuses him of being a 'Bluthund' (L, p. 355), a term often used by Noske's opponents in reference to his role in putting down the Spartacist Uprising of 1919. Throughout the play, in fact, Luther appears as a hypocritical figure who addresses the peasants as 'Brüder' (L, p. 326) while also preaching support for the use of force against them – much like the SPD leaders who were accused of regarding themselves as the comrades of the revolutionary left while simultaneously acting against them.

Whereas Luther is depicted in a wholly negative light as a hypocrite and traitor, Müntzer appears as an inspirational revolutionary leader. In Act

<sup>31</sup> See Ben Fowkes, *Communism in Germany under the Weimar Republic*, London 1984, pp. 194–5.

One, we encounter him initially through other characters' descriptions of him. He is described as a preacher whose 'Wort ist Feuer' (L, p. 320), an image which refers to his visionary fervour and connects him with the 'feurig rot' of the sky (L, p. 319) – the symbolic 'red' dawn suggestive of both an apocalyptic renewal and the imminent arrival of a communist future. His vision of the arrival of God's kingdom on earth is characterised by 'Freiheit und Gleichheit aller Menschen' (L, p. 321), which translates in practical terms into calls to ransack the castles and cloisters and convert farms and mines into 'Volkseigentum' (L, p. 321). As the play progresses, Lask explicitly likens Müntzer to the communist leader Karl Liebknecht, who was executed by the paramilitary Freikorps following his role in the 1919 Spartacist Uprising. This becomes apparent in the following conversation:

ZUSCHAUER Und der andere, der sprach wie Karl Liebknecht. Wie heißt der doch?

REGISSEUR Thomas Münzer hieß er.

ZUSCHAUER Der gefällt mir. Der ist ein richtiger Vertreter und Führer der Unterdrückten. (L, p. 329)

The use of the adjective 'richtig' explicitly evokes a contrast between Müntzer/Liebknecht and Luther/Ebert/Noske: it is very clear whom Lask wishes us to regard as the 'true' representatives of the proletariat.<sup>32</sup>

The connection between Müntzer and Liebknecht is evoked again in the final scene of the play, after Müntzer's execution is announced. We are thus invited to see both figures as martyrs who have given up their lives for the revolutionary struggle. Strikingly, this scene constructs Müntzer as a Christ-like figure, who is unjustly sentenced to death. His trial takes place in a public square where he is scorned by the crowd ('HÖHNISCHE RUFEN Macht Platz! Der große Prophet Thomas Münzer kommt dahergefahren', L, p. 356) and mocked by the priests and elders:

ZWEITER EDELMANN "Ich fahre daher mit dem Schwert des Gerichts", hat er an Graf Albrecht geschrieben. Nun kommt er wirklich dahergefahren auf dem Schinderkarren.

ZWEITER PRIESTER Wo sind nun dein Gott und deine Engelscharen?

ZWEITER EDELMANN Wo sind die Massen deines Volks? (L, p. 356)

These taunts are direct echoes of those made against Jesus in the Passion narrative, a connection which is strengthened further by the comparison

<sup>32</sup> Further explicit links to events of post-World War I Germany include a comparison between the duplicitous behaviour of the nobility and that of General Oskar von Watter (1861–1939) during the Ruhr Uprising of 1920 (L, p. 350), as well as a contrast drawn between the behaviour of leaders in Mülhausen and Moscow (L, p. 356).

of the Elector of Saxony, who ultimately sentences Müntzer to death, with Pontius Pilate, and the reference to the temple curtain being torn in two:

DIE ALTE Wehe, wehe! Bluthochzeit feiert der Böse. Sahet ihr nicht, wie der Vorhang des Tempels zerriß, da man den Leib des Volkes schlug ans Kreuz?! *Auf die Fürsten zeigend.* Stehet dort nicht Pilatus, der falsche Richter? Wäscht seine Hände im Blut des Volks? (L, p. 358)

Though the old woman is then immediately dismissed by the Elector as a madwoman, her insight brings together the various threads of allusive references in the final scene. On the one hand, the biblical parallels point towards a glorification of Müntzer's self-sacrifice. On the other hand, it is not the body of Christ that is crucified here, but rather the 'Leib des Volkes', an image that echoes a line in Georg Büchner's revolutionary manifesto, the *Hessische Landbote* (1834), where the author refers to the taxation of the peasants by the nobility of Hessen as 'der Blutzehnte, der von dem Leib des Volkes genommen wird'.<sup>33</sup> Büchner's use of the biopolitical image highlights his concern that the exploitative system of capitalist production 'does violence to human subjects'.<sup>34</sup> Lask obviously shares this concern, but her play also highlights the indomitable strength of the collective body of the people. In Müntzer's final speech to his disciples (echoing, perhaps, Christ's Last Supper), he refers to the fact that, despite his own death, the body of the people will live on:

MÜNZER Ich hab ein groß Werk begonnen, und dafür muß sterben mein Leib. Aber wisset, Volkes Leib stirbt nicht. Volkes Sach stirbt nicht. [...] Der Same unsres Geistes aber wird aufgehen in der ganzen Welt. Volkes Seele und Kraft ist nit zu überwinden. Einmal werden aufstehen alle Völker. (L, p. 357)

Through the use of the verb 'aufstehen', Lask transforms the Christian belief in resurrection ('Auferstehung') into a focus on popular uprising ('Aufstand') more consonant with her Marxist stance: it is through collective struggle, not religious practices, that the proletariat can move beyond its suffering and enter a heavenly existence.<sup>35</sup>

<sup>33</sup> Georg Büchner, *Sämtliche Werke und Schriften*, 18 vols, ed. Burghard Dedner and Thomas Michael Mayer, Darmstadt 2001–13, II/1, p. 6.

<sup>34</sup> Ernest Schonfield, 'Büchner and Paine on Elitism and Equality', in *Georg Büchner: Contemporary Perspectives*, ed. Robert Gillett, Ernest Schonfield, and Daniel Steuer, Leiden 2017, pp. 121–47 (p. 146). See also Michael Perraudin, *Literature, the Volk and the Revolution in Mid-Nineteenth Century Germany*, New York 2000, pp. 37–64.

<sup>35</sup> This play on the words 'auferstehen' and 'aufstehen' is also found at the end of Act 4, in an exchange between the old lady and one of the spectator figures (L, p. 351).

## PERFORMING PROLETARIAN SOLIDARITY

While Engels' study on the Peasants' War highlighted the structural fragmentation of Germany as one of the main reasons for the failure of the uprising, Lask's play translates this conclusion into an emphasis on the importance of proletarian solidarity. Shortly before Müntzer's death in Act 5, he highlights a key lesson that needs to be learned as a result of the peasants' defeat:

MÜNZER [...] Der Aufruhr ist niedergeschlagen. [...] Im Volk war viel Kraft und Glauben, doch noch zu wenig Einigkeit, zu wenig brüderlich Zusammenstehn, zu wenig Kampfgehnheit. (L, p. 357)

Müntzer is clearly referring to his own peasants here, yet his emphasis on the importance of unity and 'brotherly' solidarity also serves as a message that can be taken on by the modern spectators of Lask's play: if they wish to avoid similar defeat in their class struggle, they need to come together as a mass and exert their collective strength. The use of the adverb 'noch' in this context implies that this vision of collectivity has not yet been achieved, neither in Müntzer's lifetime nor in the present of the 1920s. Lask thereby highlights the latent revolutionary force of the collective that needs to be tapped in order to recuperate in the present the lost potential of earlier failed uprisings.

Lask engages with this need to cultivate proletarian solidarity in many of the theoretical essays which she published from the mid-1920s on, where she participates in an ongoing – and often heated – discussion among leftist writers about the ideal nature and form of revolutionary literature.<sup>36</sup> In her 1929 essay 'Über die Aufgaben der revolutionären Dichtung', she argues that the most important function of revolutionary literature is 'die Stärkung des Massen- und Klassengefühls' and the depiction of 'Kollektiverlebnis'.<sup>37</sup> It is the duty of the writer, she suggests, to conjure up an 'ausgebeutetes und kämpfendes Proletariat', 'ein Erlebnis, in dem nicht der einzelne sich gespiegelt sieht, sondern der einzelne als Teil der Klasse und Masse eingeordnet sich erlebt'.<sup>38</sup> For this reason, she recommends mass dramas, revues, and 'Sprechchöre' as the most appropriate forms for bringing the proletariat to revolutionary consciousness, since they allow the individual to experience being part of a greater collective.<sup>39</sup> Lask's essay might usefully be read in the context of what Sabine Hake terms 'the proletarian

<sup>36</sup> Key essays from this discussion can be found in the volume *Zur Tradition der sozialistischen Literatur* (note 15). For a useful overview of the main controversies, see Rüdiger Safranski and Walter Fähnders, 'Proletarisch-revolutionäre Literatur' (note 14), pp. 174–231.

<sup>37</sup> Berta Lask, 'Über die Aufgaben der revolutionären Dichtung', *Die Front*, 8 (1929), 232–4, reprinted in *Zur Tradition der sozialistischen Literatur* (note 15), pp. 133–6 (p. 134).

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 134.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*



dream' – that is, a 'collective fantasy', found in images, stories, performances, songs, symbols, and rituals, that 'promises the victory of class struggle and revolution'.<sup>40</sup> This fantasy, Hake suggests, relies on the creation of an 'emotional community' through historically mediated cultural practices.<sup>41</sup> One of the key examples she cites is the genre of the 'Sprechchor', which became popular in the 1920s and 30s with leftist writers in Germany, and which 'staged multitudes, moved collectivities, and forged communities'<sup>42</sup> through 'the pronouncement of "we" by choral players speaking and moving in unison'.<sup>43</sup> This genre, she suggests, 'established the emotional regimes necessary for performers as well as audiences to identify as "proletarian"'.<sup>44</sup>

Though *Thomas Münzer* is clearly not a 'Sprechchor', Lask did write regularly in this genre, with previous works including *Weihe der Jugend* (1922), written for performance by a school chorus, *Die Toten rufen* (1923), based on the murder of Karl Liebknecht and Rosa Luxemburg, and *7. November* (1924), which engages with the anniversary of the Russian Revolution. Moreover, many of her dramatic works also incorporate elements of the choric form through their use of massed groups who speak in unison. We see this in the final scene of *Thomas Münzer*, where groups of workers from the Prologue, who have been sitting among the audience for the main part of the play, return to the stage and speak in chorus:

ALLE Wir, die Elends-Dawes-Garde, wir, das schaffende Volk, wir Enkel der Erschlagenen, wir grüßen dich toten Bruder Thomas Münzer. Jetzt ist es die Zeit, die du geweissaget hast. Jetzt stehen auf alle Völker der Erde zu Kampf und Sieg. Wir üben uns im Kampf. Wir rüsten zum Sieg. Seid einig, brüderlich und kampfgewillt! So werden wir siegen und werden gründen das Reich, unser Reich in dieser Welt. Unser die Welt! (L, p. 358)

Here, the workers perform an imagined community based on their position as the symbolic grandchildren of those who died in previous revolutionary uprisings. Read in the light of Hake's study, the repetition of the third-person plural form ('wir'/'unser') can be viewed as a performative utterance of group identity which serves three interrelated psychological and discursive functions. First, it indicates 'a declaration of group belonging' based on the differentiation between self and other:<sup>45</sup> in this context, it creates a sense of commonality based on willingness to fight against the bourgeoisie. Secondly, it serves as 'a collective mode of enunciation that presumes full agreement between performers

<sup>40</sup> Sabine Hake, *The Proletarian Dream: Socialism, Culture and Emotion in Germany, 1863–1933*, Berlin 2017, p. 3.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 6.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 224.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 222.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 224.

and spectators';<sup>46</sup> the spoken 'we' is implicitly extended to include the audience, which is thereby drawn into the proletarian struggle as part of the mass. Thirdly, it performs 'a gesture of empowerment', a 'demonstration of shared political will' that has the potential to move beyond the theatre space into the streets.<sup>47</sup> This empowerment is particularly apparent in the final lines of this choric speech, where the articles and pronouns shift from the demonstrative to the possessive: 'werden gründen *das Reich, unser Reich in dieser Welt. Unser die Welt!*' (L, p. 358, my italics), indicating an act of taking collective ownership over a world in which the speakers were once marginalised. This paves the way for a communal rendition of the 'Internationale' by performers and spectators, mirroring the opening singing of the 'Warszawianka' and cementing the formation of collective agency among those present.

Lask's play can thus be understood as an attempt not only to depict the collective strength of the proletarian mass, but to cultivate it through the performative structures of the mass drama. In this regard, she goes further than she acknowledges in the preface to the published version of the play, where she suggests that her intention is to 'show' ('zeigen') the revolutionary ancestors of the modern proletariat and 'unfurl' ('entrollen') images of the lives and struggles of the peasants (L, p. 311). These verbs situate the play's audience in a passive role, implying that the spectators are merely passive observers of the events on stage. Instead, the drama creates a sense of mass solidarity on a discursive level through the staged performance of a collective 'we', which includes the audience and creates a sense of shared investment in an emotional community. At the same time, the participatory nature of the mass drama, which uses amateur actors and blurs the boundary between stage and audience by locating actors among the spectators, lends an experiential dimension to the performance of proletarian community: it allows performers and spectators to play a part in the group solidarity of which they speak. As a result, the play creates the conditions for spectators to envisage themselves as playing an active role in the creation of a post-capitalist society.

## CONCLUSION

In his study of calendars and cultural memory, Eviatar Zerubavel suggests that the study of 'social timelines constructed by mnemonic communities' can help to shed light on the construction of collective memory.<sup>48</sup> The process of 'mnemonic synchronisation', which occurs when a community

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>48</sup> Eviatar Zerubavel, 'Calendars and History: A Comparative Study of the Social Organisation of National Memory', in *States of Memory: Conflicts, Continuities, and Transformations in National Commemoration*, ed. Jeffrey K. Olick, Durham, NC 2003, pp. 315–37 (p. 316).

marks an anniversary, can contribute to fostering a sense of collective identity, since members of the community in question are involved in simultaneously focusing their attention on the same moment in the past.<sup>49</sup> At the same time, the choices made by a mnemonic community to commemorate certain events can shed light on its values and 'visions of [its] social essence'.<sup>50</sup> Viewed in this light, the commemoration by the KPD of the 400th anniversary of the Peasants' War can be seen as part of a broader attempt on the part of the party to create commonality among its members through the evocation of a shared heritage. Looking back at key uprisings in German history, it attempts to create a narrative of political legitimacy for itself based on key moments of popular opposition to oppression. This narrative portrays the proletariat of the 1920s, through the organisation of the KPD, as the heirs to what Edwin Hoernle describes as the 'gewaltige revolutionäre Bewegung' of the sixteenth century.<sup>51</sup>

As a site of memory, Lask's *Thomas Münzer* drama mediates a vision of the Peasants' War that seeks to highlight the relevance of the historical events to the proletariat of the 1920s. Through the play, Lask harnesses the anniversary capital of the 1524–5 uprising in order to construct a vision of revolutionary heritage for the modern KPD. The technique of historical analogy which she uses to link the sixteenth-century events to recent history not only serves to make the events of the play comprehensible to the workers in her audience; it also portrays the present class struggle as part of a much larger national tradition of fighting for the rights of the downtrodden. In addition, Lask's work builds on premediated versions of the Peasants' War narrative, such as Engels' *Der deutsche Bauernkrieg*, thereby creating a sense of intellectual heritage for her work and linking the play with a long tradition of leftist scholarship. Her play clearly has a didactic impetus, drawing out key lessons to be learned by the contemporary proletariat from the failure of the sixteenth-century uprising, such as the importance of unity and collective action, which are made explicit to the audience on the level of conceptual knowledge through the explanations of the 'Regisseur' and 'Zuschauer' figures. At the same time, the play enacts this didactic aspect on an experiential level, enabling spectators to experience a sense of mass solidarity through the evocation of a collective 'we' which breaks down the distance between audience and performers. The text thereby serves to inspire the contemporary proletariat to unite in collective, revolutionary action.

Returning to Erll's study of the dynamics of cultural memory, the commemoration of the 400th anniversary of the Peasants' War can be situated in a broader process of transmission and circulation of cultural memories relating to the uprising of 1525. Significantly, these

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 317.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 319.

<sup>51</sup> Hoernle, 'Der große deutsche Bauernkrieg' (note 2), 182.

memories were remediated by the Sozialistische Einheitspartei (SED) of the German Democratic Republic in the post-war years, providing what Raina Zimmering describes as 'Additionsmythen zum Ursprungsmythos [des sozialistischen Staats], die seine spezifisch klassenkämpferische und revolutionäre Richtung hervorheben sollten'.<sup>52</sup> The remediation of these memories can be seen in the proliferation of literary texts, films, and plays published after 1949 which engage with the events of 1524–5,<sup>53</sup> along with the naming of streets and public squares after key figures from the uprising.<sup>54</sup> This process of remediation reached its peak in 1975 with the 450th anniversary of the Peasants' War, for which the government provided funds to restore key locations associated with Müntzer's life and commissioned a monumental painting by the Schoenebeck born artist Werner Tübke (1929–2004),<sup>55</sup> which was to be located in a specially erected rotunda at Bad Frankenhausen, the site of one of the largest battles of the Peasants' War.<sup>56</sup> Completed in 1987, the image seems to echo Lask's play in its use of Christian iconography to depict the plight of Müntzer. In the painting, though, the revolutionary leader is depicted as anything but heroic: he stands helplessly looking on as battles rage around him, as though he knows his cause is lost. The revolutionary activism of Lask's play is completely absent here, as the painting conveys an overwhelming sense of futility and waste. The pessimistic mood of this particular act of remediation, which officially opened to the public on 14th September 1989, seems to anticipate the impending collapse of socialism in Europe, and, with it, the revolutionary spirit that was so clearly evident in 1925.

<sup>52</sup> Zimmering, *Mythen in der Politik der DDR* (note 25), p. 171. As Zimmering notes (pp. 173–5), the official GDR engagement with the Peasants' War was complicated by its attempts to lay claim to the legacy of Martin Luther and the Reformation.

<sup>53</sup> These include novels by Rosemarie Schuder (*Meine Sichel ist scharf*, 1955); Hans Loorbeer (*Die Rebellen von Wittenberg*, 1959); plays by Günther Weisenborn (*Ballade vom Eulenspiegel*, 1949), Friedrich Wolf (*Thomas Münzer: Der Mann mit der Regenbogenfahne*, 1953), Dieter Forte (*Martin Luther & Thomas Münzer oder Die Einführung der Buchhaltung*, 1970), and Horst Kleineidam (*Hinter dem Regenbogen*, 1974); television dramas such as *Ich, Thomas Müntzer, Sichel Gottes*, dir. Kurt Veth, 1989; and DEFA films such as *Thomas Müntzer – Ein Film deutscher Geschichte*, dir. Martin Hellberg, 1956.

<sup>54</sup> For examples, see Zimmering, *Mythen in der Politik der DDR* (note 25), p. 173.

<sup>55</sup> On the painting's genesis, see Werner Tübke, Günter Meißner, and Gerhard Nurza, *Bauernkrieg und Weltgericht: Das Frankenhausener Monumentalbild einer Wendezeit*, Leipzig 1995, p. 156.

<sup>56</sup> A full study of the politics surrounding the 450th anniversary lies beyond the scope of this article. For further details of this, see Zimmering, *Mythen in der Politik der DDR* (note 25), pp. 230–56, and Jan Scheunemann, *Reformation und Bauernkrieg: Erinnerungskultur und Geschichtspolitik im geteilten Deutschland*, Leipzig 2010. On the place of the Peasants' War in GDR historiography, see Laurenz Müller, *Diktatur und Revolution: Reformation und Bauernkrieg in der Geschichtswissenschaft des 'Dritten Reiches' und der DDR*, Stuttgart 2004.